

The SKIRMISHERS

FEARE SERIES: BOOK I

ALEC MERRILL

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Scripture taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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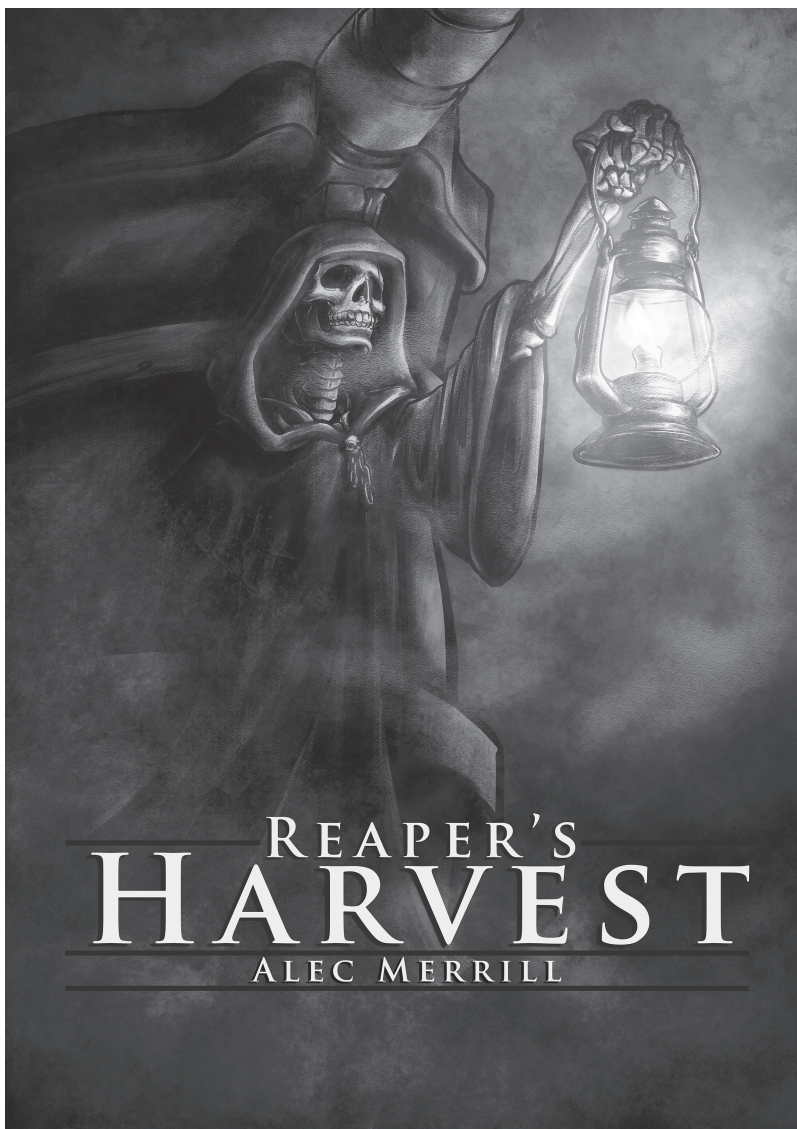
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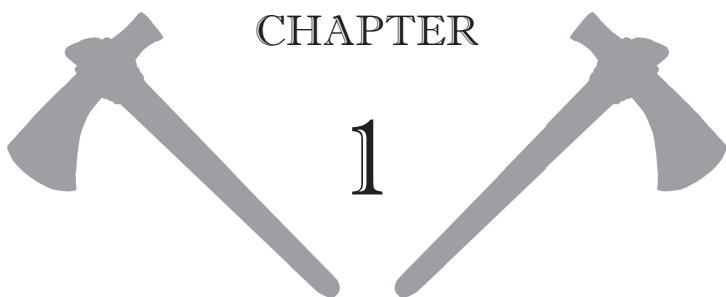
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Two crossed axes, one on the left and one on the right, with their heads pointing upwards and outwards, framing the chapter title.

CHAPTER

1

There was an unnatural silence while paddling toward the landing. On previous visits to the Walker homestead, there had always been some sound to indicate whether someone was home. Those sounds ranged from the slap of an axe against a block of wood, to the laughter of the Walker kids as they played. Now there was nothing. Even the birds and insects were silent.

The landing was just a bare spot on the north bank where someone could pull a canoe out of the water without damaging the brittle birch-bark hull. The trees surrounding the landing were a mix of deciduous and large evergreens. Any one of these trees could easily conceal a man. Combined, they could cloak an entire war party. The thought of a war party seemed farfetched. Although England and France had been at war for over two years, no war party had visited the area since the war began. French settlers lived only sixty miles to the northeast as the crow flies, but that was a long distance given the terrain. This was the frontier and the only pathway was the river. If a war party travelled down that river, word would spread.

The lack of wind stilled the tree branches. Spotting any movement in such stillness is easy. The lack of observed movement didn't ease his apprehension. The hair on the back of his neck tingled.

Walker's canoe lay upside down at the side of the landing. The sight of the canoe indicated Walker's presence, for there was literally no place to go by foot. The only settlements were either upstream or downstream.

As it was harvest season, the family likely still toiled in the fields. They might also be in the cabin. With an hour remaining before last light and the supper hour, that seemed unlikely. Walker was a hard worker. He used the entire day for work, except on the Sabbath. Getting the harvest in as soon as possible would provide extra motivation to use any remaining daylight. Having the entire family assist in gathering the harvest only made sense.

Another few paddle strokes brought the canoe closer to the landing. Was there someone lying in wait? Although nothing unusual was visible, living on the frontier made a person more cautious and sensitive to the environment. This environment screamed caution.

When the canoe touched shore at the landing, it would be the moment of greatest vulnerability. A man exiting a canoe was off-balance and pre-occupied with footing and staying dry. His attention focused on pulling the canoe on shore, alertness to the surrounding area momentarily diminished. It was the perfect time for any adversary to spring a trap.

Everyone had three senses -- sight, sound, and smell to detect a trap. An intense visual scrutiny of the shoreline failed to disclose any threat, so that covered sight. There was no sound, threatening or otherwise. Only smell remained. Sniffing the air provided no indication of anything out of the ordinary. The only smells detected included the pine scent from the trees and the humid smell of the river.

A smart man never breaks visual contact with an opponent. Although there was currently no identifiable opponent, breaking visual contact with the shore was a sure-fire way of giving any possible opponent an advantage. Not one to provide a potential opponent with an opening, he reached down to the bottom of the canoe with the left hand in search of his musket. The right hand kept a good grip on the paddle. Never once did he stop searching the banks around the landing. The failure to feel the musket caused him to glance down. The place where the musket

normally rested was empty. Realization came immediately. The canoe had been overloaded when departing home that morning. With no room in the canoe, the musket still hung above the cabin door back at home. Cursing about it now didn't help.

The current continued to push the canoe gently downstream past the landing. It was decision time; head in to the landing, or head back upstream to home. Despite considerable apprehension, he decided to paddle to the landing.

A short flurry of hard paddling propelled the canoe to the landing. As the canoe nosed up to the bank, he jumped out into cold knee-deep water. Tossing the paddle to the bottom of the canoe, he pulled the canoe from the water and positioned it between him and any attackers that might rush out of the trees. The thin walls of the canoe wouldn't slow any musket ball, but the canoe provided a suitable obstruction to delay a charging enemy.

Squatting behind the canoe, he paused to search each tree for indication of potential trouble. A slight sigh of relief escaped his lips. No attack had occurred during this period of greatest vulnerability. Puzzled and still apprehensive, he darted up the trail towards the cabin. It was only one hundred yards or so through the woods to the first field. Scanning for sign along that path provided no clues, as the trail was barren of any recent sign. The cabin off to the right was visible from the edge of the trees. It appeared the same as it always did -- squat, solid and functional. There was no movement near it. A glance at the fields detected no movement there. Still nervous, he remained behind a tree and surveyed everything in all directions. There was no movement anywhere. Finally, with no excuse left for pausing, he stepped into the open and approached the cabin.

"Anyone home?"

Not hearing any reply, he again shouted, "Hey Paul Walker, its Zeke Feare. Where are ye?"

There was no response, just the noise from a light gust of wind. The cabin door was partially open. A glance through that door to check for the Walkers quickly verified the emptiness of the cabin. The room looked

normal except for an overturned chair near the table. Any fire in the hearth had long ago burned itself out.

There were no outbuildings on the property, save an outhouse and a root cellar, both of which had closed doors. In the case of the root cellar, the door opened outward and was secured in the closed position with a board dropped into two wood brackets protruding from the doorframe. In that position, no one inside could exit.

Somewhat perplexed that no one was home, Zeke took the time to survey the homestead. There were two fields with no fence between them. The left field still had standing corn. It was still early to harvest the corn. In another week or so, it would be ready. By then a late September frost would have hit the area stopping any further growth. The cobs would dry sufficiently to pick.

The right field was just stubble, as Walker had already harvested the wheat. Something of interest caught Zeke's attention. The tree line on the far side of the field seemed further back than it had been on the previous visit. When scanning the tree line from the trail upon arrival, nothing seemed out-of-place. Now, scanning from outside the cabin, with the sun at a slightly different position, it was possible to identify an odd lump beside an overturned stump located on the edge of the north-eastern corner of the field.

The number of overturned stumps was impressive. Paul had cleared substantially more land since the last visit. Was it possible that Paul had some special tool or way to remove the stumps easily? Most people used a stone and a long pole as a lever if they didn't have a team or couldn't rent one. If Paul was using some different technique, that was of interest. Maybe Walker's technique could be adapted to speed the clearing of the Feare homestead. It was worth investigating, even if it took a few extra minutes.

Placing hands on hips, Zeke kicked the ground a couple of times with a wet moccasin, while considering whether to leave a message or just go. Occupied at first with clearing his homestead and then busy with the harvest, it had been some time since the last visit to the Walkers. Paul

was likely just as busy doing the same things on this homestead, which curtailed any movement between the homesteads.

Paul was a neighbour and friend. Speaking with Walker was a treat, not because of Paul's verbal skills, but because Zeke rarely spoke to another human being for a month at a time. There were no other neighbours within three hours of paddling downstream. No attempt to discover neighbours had been made upstream. The real treat in coming to the Walkers' home was the interaction with Paul's wife, Debra, and the two kids, Jenny and David. It was funny how little things such as the lack of sight or sound of a woman or kids could affect you. Debra was not the prettiest of women, and the kids were an unruly mob, but a few hours of visiting every couple of months helped dissipate the loneliness of frontier life. After some consideration, Zeke decided to leave an indication of his visit so that the Walkers would know he wasn't avoiding them.

It was unlikely that the Walkers had any paper inside, and if they did, it would upset them if Zeke used the paper for something as trivial as a note to say that they had missed him. Besides, Zeke couldn't read or write. Whether Paul Walker could read or write had never arisen in any conversation. Taking out a knife, Zeke bent down to scratch a message in the earth in front of the cabin door. The kids always liked his visits, because Zeke played with them for short periods. They likely needed some outside interaction as much as he did. Zeke tried to think of something that would make them smile when they spotted that message, and decided on a little skunk.

It took a bit of time to scratch out something that resembled a skunk, because of weak drawing skills. After a few minutes of scratching dirt, Zeke stood back, stretched, and examined the creation. It was far from artistic. Whether the drawing represented a skunk, a small pig or a big woodchuck wasn't clear after studying the scratching from different angles. The aim of the drawing was to provide the kids some amusement. It was more likely they'd laugh at the so-called artist.

Completing the drawing had burned some valuable daylight. If the Walkers returned home in the dark and stepped on the drawing without

seeing it, all that time was wasted. Looking up at the sun to get a feel for the amount of time before dark, Zeke realized it was time to head home. There was just enough daylight to look at Walker's stump removal activities.

Zeke's spirits lifted while trudging over the harvested wheat field. Perhaps this side-trip would be worthwhile after all if he discovered an improved method to extract tree stumps. There was also an added bonus. The walk warmed his feet and helped dry the moccasins. It was too bad the moccasins would get wet again when launching the canoe.

Approaching the lump, Zeke could see that whatever it was, Paul had covered it with some fabric. That was strange. Paul was no different from most folks on the frontier. If they needed to cover something outside, they would use canvas. Since canvas was hard to come by, skins would suffice, preferably deer or moose hides because they were bigger and you didn't have to sew as much. So why was Paul using fabric? All things considered, a smarter use for that fabric was clothes for the kids.

The closer he approached the lump, the more Zeke's curiosity peaked. At twenty yards, it finally registered -- the lump was Paul Walker. Zeke sprinted the remaining few feet and dropped to his knees beside Walker.

Paul lay legs down in a slight depression from a recently levered out stump. Only Paul's back had been visible above the stump-hole. Lifting Paul's arm to see if there was any sign of life, all hope died. The arm was rigid. Walker had been dead for some time. Whoever had done this was long gone.

Scanning the immediate area for sign, he saw two sets of moccasin prints in the ground, between the stump-hole where Walker lay and the tree line. That meant at least two murderers.

There were two large separate holes in Walker's back. He'd been shot twice with arrows. After Walker had fallen, the murderers had approached. One of them had used a war club to crush his skull, and then had used knives to cut out their arrows for reuse on another helpless victim.

Sons-of-bitches -- Indians! No white man used arrows. Even if a white man did use arrows, no white man would then cut those arrows back out

of a victim to reuse them. No white man used a war club; a tomahawk for sure, but not a war club. Bastards!

Paul wasn't even armed. If he had had a musket, it was long gone. Rolling the body over verified that Walker hadn't carried a knife. If he had, they would have stripped his belt off. Since the belt was untouched, there hadn't been a knife sheath on it.

Zeke considered what to do. Paul needed burying before the varmints got at him. It was a surprise they hadn't already got to him. There was little doubt the varmints would venture forth that night. The only thing lacking now was a shovel, which should be back at the cabin.

Heading back toward the cabin, Zeke braced for what he expected to find. What those heathens did to Paul was bad enough. To find the kids and Debra the same way -- God forbid!

Heading straight for the cabin door, he obliterated the skunk drawing without realizing it. Before pushing the cabin door fully open, he paused, closed both eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. It was dark inside, as the cabin only had the door and one window. Despite the poor light, the mayhem behind the door was all too visible.

Stepping inside, Zeke's foot encountered a second overturned chair, causing him to stumble. Nothing prepared him for the utter destruction inside that cabin. It looked as if an angry bear had swatted everything until it was too small to smash. There didn't appear to be a single stick of serviceable furniture, or any other serviceable thing for that matter, in the place. Despite a thorough search through the cabin, there were no bodies or blood trails. That was strange.

Circling around the cabin a couple of times resulted in no additional evidence of the Walker family. A more thorough sweep of the area turned up some sign. There was a beaten trail, which a blind man could follow, heading north where a number of people had trodden.

Zeke was no tracker, but had listened to some men explain some points about tracking over a pint. They had said to concentrate on a small area, at most a couple of feet by a couple of feet. That would be one stride in a man's walk. You were supposed to count the number of footprints in

that area, and identify any different markings, such as the type of shoe or moccasin, the size of the footprint, or pattern of walking such as toe in, toe out, or pressure on the heel -- those types of things. The number of footprints would give you an indication of the size of the party, and the other marks, an idea of the composition of the party. Searching for an easy spot to count, Zeke estimated there were about fifteen men or at least fifteen adults that wore moccasins. There were three smaller tracks made by shoes. He assumed these were the Walkers. Zeke followed the tracks for some distance, confirming the northern direction of the raiding party.

Zeke headed back to the Walker homestead as there was little he could do for Debra or the kids at the moment. He searched for a shovel to start the sad duty of burying Paul. Those thieving, murderous heathens had even stolen the shovel. How the hell was he supposed to bury poor Paul? One thing was for sure, he needed to get Paul underground deep enough so that the varmints couldn't get to him. Paul deserved at least that much, and Zeke was the only one present to provide that last service.

Heading back to where Paul lay, Zeke looked around for stones. When clearing land, any farmer removed and piled any dislodged stones. Somewhere around there would be such a pile. Back on the Feare homestead, Zeke intended to use those collected stones for the foundation of a barn, when he eventually got around to building it. A search began around the cabin for piles of stones in the assumption that Paul Walker might have done the same thing. There weren't any piles near the cabin. A small stone pile lay on the opposite side of the field from where Walker lay. The choice was simple. Either drag Paul over to the other side, or make multiple trips carrying rocks across the field.

It was a nasty job dragging Paul across that field. Fortunately, it was dark, so the nastier aspects weren't as noticeable. It was just one more score to settle with those damned Indians. Zeke hated the indignity caused by dragging Paul's body across the field to bury him. After such a violent death, it was just too much.

With Walker across the field, Zeke began the job of preparing a grave. Using a knife and bare hands, Zeke scraped a shallow hole. After pulling

Walker's body into the hole, Zeke crossed the hands and then tossed the dirt on top. Zeke used all available stones to cover Walker.

Heading back to the cabin, Zeke searched for some cord to make a cross. There was nothing, so he ripped a piece of fabric and used it with a couple of sticks. Using a rock from the top of the grave, he tapped the crude cross in place.

"Goodbye my friend. I hope you're in a better place. You deserve it."

Having nothing left to say over Walker's grave, Zeke headed back to the cabin. He was hungry, tired and bitter. In the expectation of a good meal at the Walkers' Zeke had skipped breakfast. It was now well past supper. There was no food, and even if he had found some, there was nothing in which to cook it. The axe, like everything else, was missing so it was impossible to chop any wood for a fire. Realizing the futility of it, Zeke headed back toward the canoe. It was a good paddle upstream to home and the night would be half over before arriving.

Zeke had travelled to the Walkers in the hopes of good conversation, hearing a woman's voice and consuming a meal that he didn't have to cook. Instead, he found Paul Walker murdered, Debra and the kids abducted with the likelihood of spending the remainder of their miserable lives as slaves to the Indians. Everything the Walkers had worked for all their lives was gone, destroyed or stolen from them.

It was enough to make a person cry -- or crave vengeance.